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THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT—IX

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THE ALLIED VICTORIES IN PALESTINE AND THE BALKANS.

DURING the great fight for the Hindenburg Line, there were taking place in Palestine and the Balkans certain events which were destined to have a far-reaching effect upon the strategical situation and conduct of the war on the Western front.

On September 19, 1918, General Allenby, in command of British, Indian, Australian, and a few French troops in Palestine, attacked the Turks from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. East of the Jordan he was assisted by an Arabian army. In this attack, known as the Battle of Samaria, Allenby broke through the Turkish line between that town and the sea, and, having pushed his cavalry northward and eastward, succeeded, in the next few days, in cutting the Damascus railway in rear of the Turks and in seizing the passages of the Jordan, thereby closing their last avenue of escape. The result was that a large part of the Turkish army was enveloped and captured. What remained was routed and dissipated, a few thousand, incapable of further resistance, escaping towards Aleppo. These operations annihilated the Turkish army in Palestine and put Allenby's army in a position where, by a rapid march northward, it could reach Aleppo ahead of the retreating Turkish Mesopotamian army, sever its communications at that point, and compel its surrender. On September 25, the day before Foch opened his great attack on the Hindenburg Line along the Meuse-Argonne front, the British War Office announced that General Allenby had taken more than 40,000 prisoners and 265 guns in the Palestine offensive.

While these stirring events were happening in Palestine and Syria, the Allied forces were meeting with similar success in the Balkans. On September 15, 1918, General Franchet d'Esperey commanding the Allied armies on the Salonika front in Macedonia, attacked the center of the Bulgarian line across the high ground in the angle formed by the Vardar and Cerna Rivers, broke through the line, and pushed northward some twelve or fifteen miles up the Vardar Valley. This attack, followed a few days later by other attacks against the Bulgarian line east of the Vardar in the vicinity of Lake Doiran, opened a great gap through the center of the Bulgarian line across the Vardar Valley, along which passes the Nish-Uskub-Veles-Salonika railway. Upon this railway the Bulgarians and Austrians in Macedonia depended almost entirely for their supplies, munitions, and reinforcements. Consequently, when the Allied forces pushed into this gap, seized the railway, and ascended the valley towards Uskub, they cut the communications, not only of the Bulgarians east of the Vardar, but of the Bulgarians and Austrians west of that river, and thus placed them in an extremely perilous position.

On September 26, the day that Foch began his great offensive along the Meuse-Argonne front, the Serbians reported an advance of seventy-five miles up the Vardar Valley and the capture of the fortress and railway center of Veles; and, on the same day, the French War Office stated that the Allied troops on the Salonika front had captured in this offensive more than 10,000 Bulgarians. On the following day the Bulgarians asked for an armistice and, two days later, on September 29, 1918, withdrew from the war by accepting the purely military terms dictated by General d'Esperey, which were to be effective until the peace conference should determine the exact conditions of peace. By the terms agreed upon, the Bulgarian army was to withdraw from Greek and Serbian territory and demobilize, and Allied troops were permitted to use strategic points in Bulgaria and all means of communications. The Austrian army on the right of the Bulgarians, having lost their communications also *via* Uskub, were forced to make their way as best they could by irregular trails over the hills and mountains of Albania back to their own territory.

The Allied victory in the Balkans not only disposed of Bulgaria but it separated Turkey from Germany and Austria, severed the Berlin-Constantinople-Bagdad railway, cut in two the great theatre of operations of the Central Powers, and laid open to attack the communications of the Austrian army in Italy and of the German army on the Western front.

Coming as it did right on the heels of General Allenby's great victory in Palestine against the Turks, and just at the time when Foch on the Western front was beginning to make great breaches in the Hindenburg Line, it was a lethal blow to Germany which sealed the fate of the Central Powers. It meant that Germany had lost the war: for, from the beginning, the strategical and vital center of the whole theatre of war had been in the Balkans; and just as soon as the Salonika army was sufficiently reinforced to make a successful campaign against the Bulgarians, and cut the Berlin-Constantinople-Bagdad railway, over which the Turks were obtaining munitions of war from Germany, while Germany and Austria were getting cotton and other supplies from Asia Minor, the entire scheme of defense of the Central Powers fell to pieces like a house of cards.

The reasons were these: With the Turks deprived of munitions of war, and this deprivation coming immediately after General Allenby's masterly movements against them in Palestine, they had no alternative but to withdraw from the war and seek such favorable terms as they could obtain. This left the Salonika army free to move northward into Austria, where it was certain to be reinforced by many Jugo-Slavs and Roumanians, who were ready and anxious to join with the Allies in striking a powerful blow against Austria and Germany. Such an advance into Austria through Budapest to Vienna would cut the communications of the Austrian army in Italy,—the only army left to Austria of any consequence,—deprive it of its supplies, and compel its surrender. Indeed, the mere threat of such an advance upon its communications kept it in such a demoralized state that, when attacked about three weeks later by the Italian army, it was easily driven from its strong defensive positions, defeated, routed, and almost destroyed.

In this war, as in the days of Napoleon, a successful

battle fought by the Allies in the vicinity of Vienna would have conquered Northern Italy for them all.

Austria once defeated and out of the war, the way would have been left open for the Salonika and Italian armies to unite and attack Germany from the south. Such an attack would not only have deprived her of the wheat, oil, platinum, and other supplies which she was obtaining from Roumania and Ukrania, but, when pushed northward, would have destroyed or threatened the communications of her army on the Western front with Berlin and other important German cities. Moreover, an advance from Vienna through the friendly territory of Bohemia would have brought the Allied army almost to Dresden and within one hundred and twenty-five miles of Berlin. Such an invasion of her territory would have meant, of course, the destruction of her railways, canals, and cities; the blowing up of her bridges and munition plants; and the laying waste of her fields. And there was no way to prevent it; for she could not detach for this purpose any troops from the Western front, since she was not then even able to hold her own there. Even had troops been available, she could not then continue to feed them and her own people, with the British blockading her northern coasts and her sources of supply to the south destroyed. Seeing that all this would mean the bringing home to her people the ruin and desolation of war and, finally, the inevitable annihilation or capture of her great army on the Western front, she realized that there was nothing to do but to make terms with the Allies. Accordingly, on October 5, just six days after Bulgaria withdrew from the war, she asked for an armistice.

This, then, was the situation: Bulgaria had been defeated and had withdrawn from the war. Turkey, as a result of the annihilation of her Palestine army and the victory of the Allies in the Balkans, had become absolutely powerless to continue the struggle and was making preparations to surrender. Austria, with her whole southern boundary open to attack and the communications of her army in Italy seriously threatened, was on the verge of complete collapse. There was needed only one more thrust of the Italian army against her already partially demoralized troops on the Piave to defeat, rout, and dissipate them, and force her, too, out of the war. And Ger-

many, her armies short of food and her people threatened with starvation, her supplies from overseas and outside countries cut off, and her territory open to invasion from the south and no available troops with which to stop it, knew that she was beaten—not through the defeat of her great army on the Western front, for that was still fighting without showing the least sign of demoralization, and was to continue to fight desperately, for a period of five weeks, through a most skillfully conducted retreat; but nevertheless beaten—beaten by the collapse of her rear, brought about by the great blow in the Balkans.

When it is remembered that William II, from his first meeting with the Sultan of Turkey in 1889 until, and even after, the beginning of the great world war in 1914, had borne his grandiose scheme of a mighty German Empire almost constantly in mind; and that from the conquest of Serbia in October, November, and December, 1915, until the defeat and overthrow of the Turks and Bulgarians in September, 1918, Germany had had substantially complete control, through its entire length, of the Berlin-Constantinople-Bagdad railway, as well as control over all the territory in Europe and Asia, save that occupied and controlled by the Salonika army, which she deemed essential for the accomplishment of her great plan, one cannot but appreciate the crushing effect which the Allied blow in the Balkans must have had on her purposes and hopes; nor can one fail to appreciate, also, Germany's great strategical mistake in trying to end the war by an attack on the Western front in the spring of 1918, without first disposing of the Salonika army, and thereby making strong the strategical and vital center of the great theatre of operations of the Central Powers.

LUDENDORFF'S GREAT RETREAT

No sooner had the first break-through of the Hindenburg Line been made by the Americans on the Meuse-Argonne front than Ludendorff saw his great peril. At once he realized that unless this thrust could be stopped immediately, he must begin the withdrawal of his armies from Northern France and Belgium. Accordingly he made every effort to stop it, and was for a time partially successful. But in the meantime, other break-throughs along the Flanders and intermediate fronts of the Hinden-

burg Line had occurred; and, moreover, he soon saw that the Americans were only temporarily checked in the Argonne. Under these circumstances, there was but one thing for him to do; and that was to withdraw his armies from Northern France and Belgium to the line of the Meuse River. Accordingly, at the beginning of October he gave the order for a retreat which he had foreseen might be necessary, and for which he had previously provided.

A very difficult problem confronted Ludendorff. It was much the same kind of problem that he had had to face when Foch broke through the west side of the Château-Thierry salient, except that it was on a much larger scale. Then, only the portion of his army in the Château-Thierry salient had been endangered, but in this instance the whole of his army north of Verdun was threatened with destruction. Not only this, but the great Allied victories which, in the meantime, had been won in Palestine and the Balkans, added to Ludendorff's situation a still greater peril.

With Bulgaria out of the war; with Turkey virtually out; with Austria certain to withdraw as soon as her army on the Piave should again be vigorously attacked; with Germany already asking for an armistice; with Foch delivering anvil blows daily against the only army of any consequence left to Germany: with—in short—all the Central Powers in a state of collapse and disintegration, and nothing to stand between Germany and the on-rushing victorious armies of the Allies but the Germany army,—which though in retreat, was still unconquered,—Ludendorff was confronted with one of the most difficult military problems in all history. What could he do? What should he do? What, from a German point of view, was it best for him to do?

Strategically, had it not been for the collapse of the German nation in his rear, the thing for Ludendorff to have done, the moment he saw that it would be impossible for him to hold the Hindenburg Line, would have been to withdraw to the line of the Meuse as quickly as possible without allowing his retreat to degenerate into a rout. Because, once safely there, the river would not only stop the tanks,—then a most important offensive weapon in the hands of the Allies,—but would form with the Ardennes

Mountains, through which the river cleaves its way, an exceptionally strong defensive position, whose length was less by one hundred miles than that of the Hindenburg Line from Verdun to the English Channel.

In this connection, it should not pass unnoticed that the broad-nosed salient, whose lines run through Liège, Namur, Dinant, Mezieres, and Sedan, which the Germans would have occupied had they fallen back to the Meuse River line, had not the vulnerability to an enemy's attacks characteristic of most salients, for the reason that no important lines of railway pass through or from it into Germany. Then, too, this salient presented the greatest irregularities of surface, being "intersected by numerous ravines and streams with steep and rocky banks, by deep valleys, and by ridges of hills,"¹ which make it a great natural fortification that would have been very easy to defend.

But to make a quick retirement to the line of the Meuse, even though the German rear had not been in collapse, would have been an exceedingly risky operation, for the reason that it would have been interpreted by the German people, as well as by the Allies, as an open confession of defeat, and might have had a demoralizing effect upon the German army, which would have led to a great German disaster. And had the great bulk of the German army learned, in the course of such a hasty retirement, what they did not then know,—that their whole rear was in a state of collapse,—there would have been a great probability of this very thing happening. Then, too, a speedier withdrawal would have necessitated abandoning to the enemy greater quantities of supplies, equipments, and guns.

It was apparent that if the armistice could be agreed to while the German army was still unbeaten and on foreign soil, it would lessen for the German people the bitterness of defeat, prevent an Allied invasion and devastation of German territory, and probably result in Germany's receiving better terms in the treaty of peace. But these were the only objects for continuing the struggle, since it was evident that the conditions in Germany at that time utterly destroyed all hope of final success. Knowing that Germany was beaten and that the end was near, Ludendorff was nevertheless anxious, of course, to maintain the courage

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Ninth Edition. Vol. III, p. 513.

and *morale* of his army to the last, and to retain in his possession upon the signing of the armistice as much of the enemy's territory as possible.

Accordingly, he made his plan for a deliberate retreat. His purpose was to contest every position; to make the Allies fight for every foot of ground gained; and to fall back only when he was forced to, or when he found it absolutely necessary to prevent the cutting of his communications and capture of parts of his army.

From October 5 until the signing of the armistice on November 11, Ludendorff followed this plan. During the withdrawal, he brought every possible force to bear against the Americans and French advancing from the Meuse-Argonne front on Sedan and Mezieres, in order to hold open the line of railway from Hirson through these towns to Metz, so as to facilitate the retirement of the Germans and give them more time to withdraw their troops and supplies, especially from the Laon salient.

But, although he was able to retard greatly their progress, he could not stop them. They had seen the importance of closing the gap and of seizing the railway, and in the face of forty German divisions which Ludendorff had ordered there to oppose them, as well as in the face of the most discouraging conditions, they continued slowly but surely to press forward to their goal. And the British, French, and Belgians along other portions of the line, gradually forced back the Germans in their front.

But their progress was very slow; for Ludendorff conducted this difficult operation with great skill. His retirement was methodical. There was no rout, no *débâcle*. Up to the very last, the discipline and *morale* of his troops were good, and his rear guards fought bravely, fiercely, desperately to hold back the onrushing Allies.

It is not the purpose here to describe in detail this great retreat. It will suffice to say that, taking advantage of every known means to delay the advance of the Allied armies, Ludendorff made it extremely difficult for them to push forward; so difficult, indeed, that although they made what seemed to be almost superhuman efforts to drive back the German army, they succeeded in forcing it back during these six weeks of almost continuous fighting only a distance of some forty miles behind the Hindenburg Line.

By November 1, the Germans had retired from the Belgian coast; the British and Canadians had captured Valenciennes and were pushing forward between the Sambre and Scheldt on Mons; the Americans had forced their way northward to Bayonville, Aincreville, and Doullon, about twenty miles south of Sedan; and the French on their left had reached Vouziers about twenty-five miles south of Mezieres. By November 11, when the armistice was signed, the dividing line separating the Allies from the Germans southward from Holland to a point opposite Metz ran, approximately, from the mouth of the Scheldt, about twelve miles northwest of Antwerp, up the left bank of that river to Ghent, thence through Mons, past Hirson, through Mezieres, past the southern outskirts of Sedan, and thence along the left bank of the Meuse to a point opposite Mouzay, where it crossed the river, and thence through the northern edge of the Woevre Forest to Bezonvaux, thence to Vandieries, and thence across the Moselle to Port-Sur-Seille, opposite Metz.

Examining this line, we note that when the end came, the Germans were occupying a line through Belgium which lay approximately forty miles east of the Hindenburg Line, thirty miles west of the Meuse River line, opposite Namur, and one hundred miles west of the German frontier; and that the Americans and French had closed the gap between the Verdun-Reims front and the Ardennes Mountains, but that the gap northward of these mountains to the Dutch frontier was open and was completely covered by the German army, which extended from the mouth of the Scheldt through Ghent and Mons to the northern outskirts of Mezieres. It will be noticed also that the great Maubeuge-Charleroi-Namur-Liège-Aix-la-Chapelle railway, which passes directly through the gap into Germany, crossed the German line at right angles to it and was completely covered by it; and that the flanks of the German army occupying the line were protected on the right by Holland and on the left by the Meuse River and Ardennes Mountains from Mezieres to Sedan.

Thus we see that the great length of time required by the Americans and French to close the gap south of the Ardennes Mountains, brought about by Ludendorff's desperate and terrific fighting to keep it open, had enabled him to withdraw that portion of his army facing the

British and the Belgians along the Hindenburg Line eastward through Belgium to a position where it completely covered its line of communications back into Germany, and where its flanks rested on practically impassable obstacles.

Nevertheless, the closing of the gap from Verdun to Sedan would have made it necessary for him to continue his retreat to the Meuse River line even had the armistice not been signed; for the reason that, with such an extended front and only one line of railway behind him, he was still in a dangerous position. Then, too, the Meuse line was much stronger and much shorter, and, besides, would form a water barrier between his army and the enemy's tanks.

Had it been possible to close this gap earlier—say before the German army along the Hindenburg Line from the vicinity of St. Quentin northward to the English Channel had retired so far eastward—the strategical effect in all likelihood would have been much greater; since, in that case, an Allied thrust northward from Mezieres probably would have resulted in cutting the Charleroi-Namur-Liège-Aix-la-Chapelle railway behind the German army and would have forced a large part of that army to surrender.

But, whatever might have been the outcome under such conditions, the point I wish to emphasize is that at the time the armistice was signed the German army was in an excellent position from Mezieres northward for completing its withdrawal to the line of the Meuse without any great disaster; and once there, would have been in a very strong and most favorable position for making a determined stand.

It is, therefore, my opinion that had the armistice not been signed when it was, no great *débâcle* would have overtaken the German army in the next few weeks or months as a result of the strategical situation at the time.

There can be no question that Germany would never have signed an armistice before the defeat of her great army on the Western front had not the break in the Balkans exposed her to an attack from the south, threatened her communications, and cut off a large part of her remaining sources of supply. Nor would she have yielded until her army had been either annihilated, captured, or driven

across the Rhine. But would it have been possible for the Allied armies to do this? Let us see.

We have already pointed out the great defensive strength of the line of the Meuse. But back of it is the Moselle River and Metz with its great system of fortifications, and back of them is the line of the Saar; then come the fortress of Strassburg and the great river Rhine; and on the east bank of the Rhine, extending from Switzerland almost to Carlsruhe, are the Black Forest Mountains, which, from the days of Caesar, have been considered a most difficult obstruction for armies attempting to move through them from west to east. These are all strong defensive positions; but the Rhine and Black Forest Mountains are more than that: they are formidable obstacles, and would be impassable if defended by adequate military forces armed with modern weapons.

"Of all the operations of war," says Jomini, "there is none more arduous and difficult than the passage of a large river in the face of an enemy." When it is remembered that the passage—or attempted passage—of the Rhine in this case would have been in the face of a nation in arms, and not in the face of an enemy few in numbers, as were the armies in Jomini's and Napoleon's day; when it is remembered that the bridges of the Rhine were strongly protected by bridge-heads and field works, and that two parallel railways along the banks of the river, and many others near the German frontier, had been constructed solely with reference to battle lines, permitting quick concentration of troops upon any front of the Rhine or German frontier; and that the defensive positions, forts, and great fortresses along and near the German frontier had for more than forty years preceding the war been strengthened in every possible way to prevent an invasion of German territory, one is appalled by the magnitude of the task, and cannot but feel that its accomplishment would have been an impossibility—a task beyond human power. In view of these facts, it is submitted that there would have been no chance of the Allies winning the War on the Western front had there been no collapse of the German rear as a result of the Allied victory in the Balkans.

But even supposing, for the sake of the argument, that the war might have been won on the Western front in the following year, after approximately 4,000,000 American

soldiers had been sent there, as was the plan of the War Department, would it not have been in the face of an appalling and unnecessary sacrifice of life?—since a few thousand soldiers sent into the Balkans would, as the sequel has shown, have been a deciding factor in bringing the war to a close.

It is not the purpose in this concluding article to carry further the discussion of this interesting question, except to say that it is the deliberate opinion of the writer that, had there been no break in the Balkans and had the campaign continued during the Spring and Summer of 1919, two hundred thousand Americans sent to the Balkans would have had a much greater effect in bringing the war to a speedy end than ten times that number sent to the Western front.

To strike at the communications of the enemy without exposing your own to his attack: it was the carrying out of this principle which enabled General Foch to win the Château-Thierry salient at the beginning of his great offensive on the Western front; which enabled the British army commanders to drive the Germans from the Amiens salient and force them back to the Hindenburg Line; which enabled General Pershing to obliterate in two days the dangerous St. Mihiel salient that for many months had menaced French communications. It was the carrying out of this principle by the Americans and French, in their great thrust from the Verdun-Reims front through the Argonne Forest to Sedan and Mezieres, that put the German army in a precarious situation and forced its retreat through Belgium toward the Meuse River line. It was the carrying out of this principle by General Allenby in Palestine that enabled him to annihilate the Turkish army in his front and force the Turkish government to sue for peace. And it was the carrying out of this principle in the Balkans by General d'Esperey which not only forced Bulgaria out of the war, but, at the same time, cut or threatened the communications of the other armies of the Central Powers, and which, taken in connection with the persistent pounding of the Germans by Marshal Foch on the Western front, brought the great war to an end.

H. H. SARGENT.

(*The End*).